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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this discussion paper is to explore the concept of block transfer as an alternative to, or a supplement to, traditional course by course transfer in British Columbia (BC). Transfer in BC is essentially a bilateral process in which sending and receiving institutions negotiate credit for a course or program. One of the assumptions that underlies Charting a New Course, the strategic plan issued in 1996 by the BC Ministry of Education, Skills, and Training, is that every academic course a student takes at a sending institution should transfer automatically to a receiving institution because it has been ratified by the sending institution. By virtue of the institution's membership in the public system, the ratification should extend to each and all facets of that system. Although block transfer is well established in the professional areas, there are few examples of its application to academic programs. There are a number of different block transfer models: system-wide transfer; general education core curriculum; standardized pre-major program; flexible pre-major program; learning outcomes; and descriptive pathways. Any successful revision, if needed, will require the full agreement of all partners in the system. (JA)

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BRITISH COLUMBIA COUNCIL ON ADMISSIONS & TRANSFER

DISCUSSION PAPER

APRIL 1997

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Block Transfer: Issues and Options

A Discussion Paper
Prepared for the B.C. Council on Admissions and Transfer by
Finola Finlay
Special Advisor to the Council

Introduction

In the fall of 1996, the British Columbia Ministry of Education, Skills and Training released its Strategic Plan for the college, institute and agency sectors of the post-secondary system.

In composing their statements on access, the Strategic Planning Committee voiced what they understood to be a profound public expectation that credit transfer in British Columbia will be, or continue to be, fair, clear and reasonable, resulting in the smooth and efficient movement of students through our post-secondary institutions. They state:

> "Credit transfer agreements between post-secondary institutions will assure learners that the accredited education and training attained in one institution will be recognized by other post-secondary institutions. Block transfer agreements will be developed to allow transfer of credits between institutions, and eliminate the time consuming process of course-by-course institutional credit assessment. As part of this initiative, the Pan-Canadian Protocol on the Transferability of University credits, signed by the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, will require transferability across all first and second year undergraduate programs, and a review of policy alternatives for further credit transfer beyond first- and second-year undergraduate studies. In addition the Ministry of Education, Skills and Training will initiate a forum between the college, institute and agency system and the university sector to promote efficient and effective credit transfer arrangements."[1]

If a central goal of our post-secondary system is to assure equity of access for our students, and facilitate student flow between and among institutions, then the fundamental challenge is to accomplish this in a system characterized by numerous autonomous institutions. Part of our response to reform propositions will be predicated on whether or how far we feel we fall short of accomplishing this goal now.

The purpose of this BCCAT discussion paper is to explore the concept of block transfer[2] as an alternative to, or a supplement to traditional course-by-

1. Ministry of Education, Skills and Training. *Charting a New Course: A Strategic Plan for the Future of British Columbia's College, Institute and Agency System* (B.C., 1996) p. 37-38.
2. For the purposes of this paper, the following definition of Block Transfer is assumed: "the process whereby a block of credits is granted to students who have successfully completed a cluster of courses, or certificate or diploma, which is recognized by the receiving institution as having an academic wholeness or integrity, and which can be related in a meaningful way to part of the degree program."

Comment and response to this discussion paper is invited, and encouraged.
See page 12 for details.

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course transfer in British Columbia. A question on this topic is given at the end of the paper, and the B.C. Council on Admissions and Transfer invites your responses to it, or to other issues which are implicit in any inquiry into transfer reform. Firstly, we as post-secondary educators need to ask is a radical new vision of transfer in B.C. necessary, desirable and feasible? Or, if institutions feel that our transfer system is working well, but needs improvements, how do they work collaboratively and effectively to make those improvements? If system-wide agreements are preferable to bilateral or even multilateral agreements, how are they to be managed in an environment of diverse autonomous institutions? How can current block transfer arrangements be enhanced? As a post-secondary community, should we continue to rely on our traditional processes of negotiating transfer through voluntary agreements?

Articulation is an essential component of our system, but it is also a voluntary process which depends on trust and agreement, and operates within the context of autonomous institutions.

Transfer In British Columbia

Transfer in B.C. is essentially a bilateral process, in which sending and receiving institutions negotiate credit for a course or program. While there are some examples of multilateral collaboration, there is no concept of system-wide transfer, whereby a course or program might be deemed transferable not to an individual institution, but within the whole system. Each institution conducts its own independent evaluation of all elements of an incoming transcript, and each institution retains the right to set its own requirements and regulations for course standards and credential requirements. This means that all institutions maintain administrative structures to support their sending and receiving roles. It also means that, except under certain circumstances, every element on a student's transcript must be scrutinized and often different criteria applied in the case of each type of element.

For example, a student may transfer with an Associate of Arts degree[3] from a college to a university. That AA degree may contain courses from two or more institutions, from B.C. or elsewhere. It may contain credit earned through course challenge, or some other non-traditional assessment method, or through transfer under an articulation agreement with a non-public institution, or with a high school. The sending institution may use a different GPA scale from the receiving institution, or a unique method of calculating course hours or credit allocation. In our present transfer environment the receiving institution, in determining what credit to grant, will evaluate each element independently rather than evaluating the AA as a whole. The amount of transfer credit granted will depend on the result of that process.

To some of its proponents the concept of block transfer includes a radical revisiting of how we view transfer. For example, one of the assumptions that underlies *Charting a New Course* may be that every academic course a student takes at a sending institution should transfer automatically to a receiving institution *because* it has been developed and taught and therefore ratified by the sending institution. By virtue of the institution's membership in our public system that ratification should extend to each and all facets of that system. Proponents of this view point to the fact that B.C. colleges have been offering university transfer programs for over 30 years, that articulation committees have worked out appropriate curriculum alignments a long time ago, and that there is good evidence that college students do well at universities after they transfer. Receiving institutions should not have the right, they would argue, to set all the rules and to force sending institutions to perform always in a reactive role. Block transfer in this context would mean the automatic transfer of

3 The Associate of Arts and Associate of Science degrees are two year, university-transferable, courses of study offered by BC colleges which require breadth and depth in the arts or sciences. They emphasize the acquisition of a broad liberal education across a variety of disciplines but also allow students to concentrate in a subject area.

all academic credits a sending institution offers, with "no questions asked." Such a fundamental redefinition of the transfer process would involve radical changes to our current policies and practices.

Another assumption about block transfer may be that we can find ways not to "pick apart" the elements of a transfer program. If all members of the system, for example, could reach reasonable understandings about what constitutes an acceptable lower division preparation for the final two or three years of study in an academic discipline, then each institution should be able to construct programs which would fulfill those requirements, and designate them appropriately on the transcript. Included in this conception might be the agreement of receiving institutions not to reassess credit noted on the transcript as earned through transfer from a third institution, or through less traditional forms of assessment. In other words, all credit is allocated once, and is then automatically acceptable to all members of the system.

Should we develop a block transfer system for arts and sciences degrees in British Columbia?

The concept of post-secondary credit transfer exists in its most established and sophisticated form in the U.S. and in B.C. and Alberta, so it is to these jurisdictions this paper has looked for precedents. However, the college and university environment in the U.S. differs in two key respects from that in B.C. First, many community colleges enrolling thousands of students can be linked into one "community college system" with one chancellor and board. University systems frequently comprise many semi-autonomous campuses, but share one chancellor and central administration. Coordination and standardization *may* be less complex in this situation than in the B.C. system, although it is interesting to note that centralized governance does not appear to have protected those systems from their own transfer problems. Second, it is evident from the transfer literature that the post-secondary context is often a highly politicized arena, where change may be a result of legislation. This willingness to force change through political processes has not been typical of the B.C. approach to inter-institutional relationships, which has been characterized by articulation, negotiation and the voluntary implementation of agreements. Although this more Canadian way of doing business has been in the main highly successful, it has also resulted in the affirmation that receiving institutions are the power holders in the transfer process.

Herein lies a central paradox of the B.C. post-secondary environment: articulation is an essential component of our system, but it is also a voluntary process which depends on trust and agreement, and operates within the context of autonomous institutions. The nature of these two cornerstone values, articulation and autonomy, and the ways in which they interact and overlap, must be understood and considered in any examination of student movement and access in British Columbia.

The paper begins by exploring how principles of block transfer have been applied to professional degrees in the B.C. post-secondary system, and by describing some potential improvements to existing block transfer agreements. It then examines various potential models of block transfer, as well as examples from other jurisdictions where block transfer has been used to facilitate transfer in traditional academic studies, and presents possible applications of those principles to B.C. It concludes by inviting responses from the post-secondary system.

Current Applications of Block Transfer in B.C.

The 1996-97 *B.C. Transfer Guide* documents 155 block transfer agreements (BTA's). BTA's represent a wide spectrum of programs, but the vast majority are between two year diploma programs in career areas and professional degrees.

Eighty-three per cent of all documented block transfer agreements are represented by business (54% of all agreements) and professional programs.

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including Nursing, Natural Resources, Social Work, Education and Lab Science. The remaining agreements are generally individualistic arrangements between related programs or special purpose laddered degree completion programs provided through OLA.

The only documented academic block transfer agreement involves an Associate Degree and is between Kwantlen University College (A.Sc.) and University College of the Fraser Valley (B.Sc.). This is also the only documented notation of "guaranteed admission" associated with a block transfer agreement in the *Transfer Guide*.

Five universities and all the colleges, university colleges and institutes in the system have documented block transfer agreements, although over half of all BTA's are with the Open University.

Although the majority of BTA's appear to carry two years of credit, significant variations of credit allocation occur, and most note "individual assessment required." In some cases, the credit allocated is largely unassigned, and in such cases students may have to take more than two years of additional coursework to finish their degree.

Diploma programs which transfer as a block can be quite similar to lower division preparation programs at the receiving institution. In this case, an in-depth analysis of course outlines allows for the allocation of assigned and unassigned credit within the block. This method of course matching is particularly appropriate in the case of programs requiring a sequential acquisition of concepts or skills, such as accounting.

However, sending programs can also be substantially different from the normal lower level preparation programs at the receiving institution. Here, a holistic approach to credit allocation is utilized, whereby the receiving department makes an assessment of the overall content and outcomes of the sending program. This process can include the identification of gaps in the sending program, and recommendations for bridging coursework. A holistic approach is appropriate when the desired background for the student is more general, perhaps emphasizing broad concepts and skills in a particular field, such as human services.

Diploma students in professional disciplines who transfer without finishing the diploma are subject to normal course-by-course transfer assessment processes. Depending on the program, they may be allocated very few credits through this process, even though a completed program would earn them a block of 60 credits. Block transfer agreements provide significant incentive, therefore, for students to complete their diploma and thereby enhance their access to degree completion.

In summary, block transfer has been used extensively in B.C. as a vehicle for increasing access to degree completion opportunities for students in professional programs. The majority of BTA's involve two years of credit for a college diploma towards a university degree in a related field, and most are bilateral agreements negotiated between one sending and one receiving institution.

Improvements to Block Transfer in Professional Programs

Several B.C. programs have implemented significant variations on the basic bilateral agreement, which can serve as models for improvements to block transfer for other programs. For example, most BTA's are negotiated between sending and receiving programs which are already well established. Programs which have developed in isolation from each other, frequently tailored to specific community, scholarly, or employment-related imperatives, must then try to establish a fit between sending and receiving curricula. If new program developers can be cognizant of programmatic elements which effect transfer, laddered "learning systems" can be established which provide for student transitions from high school to degree completion. The new "B.C. Tourism Learning System" is an innovative model which not only does that but also links with apprenticeship and industry. Care must be taken, however, that pre-planning processes do not inhibit innovation, which is also a necessary part of program growth and development.

Bilateral BTA's can be time-consuming to negotiate individually. Royal Roads University and the University College of the Fraser Valley are adopting a multilateral approach in some of their programs by advertising to the system that graduates of two year diploma programs are "eligible to apply" to their degree completion programs. Although each institution has taken a slightly different approach, they

both accept the block transfer of a diploma program as an acceptable entry criteria to the final two years of their degree. The Child and Youth Care Education Consortium introduces further efficiencies into the transfer process. All post-secondary institutions offering child and youth care degrees or diplomas, or allied human service programs are represented on the Consortium, and collaboratively manage core curriculum, professional issues, and block transfer arrangements. The arrangements are common to all the receiving programs in the Consortium, so a student knows exactly what he/she has to do to be eligible to transfer to any one of the receiving institutions in B.C. offering a degree in Child and Youth Care.

Information about all BTA's in B.C. needs to be more accessible to students. The block transfer section of the *Transfer Guide*, both print and on-line, could be expanded to include multilateral agreements.

Block transfer agreements provide significant incentive for students in professional programs to complete their diploma and thereby enhance their access to degree completion.

Block Transfer in the Arts and Sciences

Although block transfer is well established in the professional areas, there are few examples of its application to academic programs. The Business and Commerce Agreement documented on page 28 of the 1996-97 *Transfer Guide* is not a block transfer arrangement, but rather a general statement of principles, although it does illustrate a coordinated approach to transfer in one discipline. The associate degree receives priority admission at SFU, but does not provide block transfer to any receiving institution, with one exception noted above.

The Provincial Strategic Planning Committee's intention was to explore the feasibility of extending the principles of block transfer to academic degrees. In formulating this objective, the Committee was no doubt influenced by the success of BTA's in the professional areas, and in reports from other jurisdictions, primarily the U.S., of the application of block transfer principles to academic degrees. The important questions the Committee has asked the B.C. Council on Admissions and Transfer to examine are centred on whether block transfer can enhance and ease transfer processes and reduce student frustration, and whether it will eliminate the need for course-by-course assessment of credit.

Arts and science programs in B.C. differ in many respects from professional programs. Several key factors must be taken into account in any debate about the application of models of block transfer to the academic context:

- Unlike career and professional programs, traditional course-by-course transfer is well established and understood in the academic disciplines, and documented in the *B.C. Transfer Guide*.
- Course-by-course transfer has been utilized in most academic disciplines because students have to establish not only how many credits they have but whether they have fulfilled the lower division requirements of the degree or the major.
- Academic students transfer with a wide variety of credits, from 3 to 60. Block transfer agreements are usually formulated to deal with complete diplomas, or with clusters of coursework, but many academic students do not have significant "blocks."
- There is only one system-wide two year academic credential in B.C., the Associate Degree. It was not formulated as a vehicle for transfer, and is not particularly suited for block transfer, as it is general in nature, and contains few prescriptions for the inclusion of lower level requirements for specific degrees or majors.
- There are no accepted common elements for all degrees in B.C. which could be "blocked," as is the case with the General Education Core Curriculum in many U.S. states.
- Each university or university college has the right to set its own requirements for majors, and these

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are frequently quite diverse. There is no standardized curriculum for any academic major areas, although similarities can exist from institution to institution.

In addition to these factors, the B.C. post-secondary context encompasses many autonomous institutions. And these institutions are growing in number and complexity: the *B.C. Transfer Guide* now lists ten receiving institutions whereas five years ago it listed four. Within each institution, primary responsibility for curriculum matters rests in the individual department, while responsibility for institutional agreements may be shared with the Senate, Education Council or Board. Provincial post-secondary articulation committees meet for each academic discipline to make sure curriculum is aligned across institutions, but these committees have no power to dictate or demand curriculum change. "Full transfer,"[4] rather than block transfer, is the main goal for these committees and for academic students.

Given this context, a significant challenge for the B.C. post-secondary system has always been to maintain choice and diversity in degrees while balancing the needs of students to transfer smoothly between and among the member institutions. This delicate equilibrium has always been worked out through a process of communication, adaptation and compromise, although sending programs are most often in the position of making those adaptations. There has been no tradition of government legislative or regulatory measures to intervene in transfer relationships between institutions, beyond the initial establishment of transferring institutions.

A system characterized by diversity of degree options benefits students because they can exercise choice in a differentiated marketplace. It is also in the best interests of the province as a whole, since it creates an environment where programs are encouraged to adapt and relate to various conditions of location, economy or evolving social factors. Maintaining choice and diversity of programs at receiving institutions, however, has also created significant challenges for sending institutions in B.C. Colleges, especially the smaller colleges, have experienced difficulty providing the range of courses students need, and can find themselves in particularly frustrating situations when one of the receiving institutions undertakes a major curriculum revision. In addition, a college may feel that courses particularly relevant to its geographic or cultural context, or the expertise of its faculty, are not appropriate for transfer students if they do not fit the requirements of the major at a receiving institution. Instead of feeling like true partners in the enterprise of designing and teaching their discipline, college faculty may feel that their contributions are not valued except as deliverers of the university-dictated curriculum.

As evidence that these challenges have been met on the whole, the B.C. post-secondary system is generally recognized in Canada as the most well integrated in the country, with a long standing transfer environment. As such, it is the envy of many other provinces which are only now trying to emulate our policies in this regard.

Nevertheless, the imperatives of access and equity require that we continue to examine all options which have the potential to improve or ease transfer for our students. At the same time, college faculty are expressing the need for more flexibility in the curriculum. Block transfer models have proven to be effective vehicles for introducing both more coordination and more flexibility into the academic transfer environment in some U.S. states. While not entirely fitting the B.C. context, some of these models may provide some useful precedents for extending block transfer to academic degrees in B.C. As such, they deserve our attention.

4 Full Transfer is defined as "transfer with no loss of credit up to stated institutional maximum, with optimal course to course equivalency (assigned credit)."

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Model 1: System-Wide Transfer

The most radical revision of the B.C. transfer system would be one encompassing the automatic acceptance of all transfer courses by all members of the system. Although there are no precedents for complete system-wide transfer in North America of which we are aware, some State legislatures (Maryland for example) have been very directive in regards to universities accepting whatever the colleges offer, as long as the courses fulfill specified criteria. In this model transfer would be viewed as a systemic instead of a bilateral process, with all first and second year courses from *all* member institutions forming the inventory of transferable courses within the system. Examination of arts and science course outlines at each institution would focus on whether designated equivalency could be established, but not on whether the course was worthy of credit. Transfer students at colleges would be guaranteed that every course they took would transfer to every public post-secondary institution in the province. Moreover, students at universities who transferred to a college, institute or other university would have the same guarantee.[5]

A significant challenge for the B.C. post-secondary system has always been to maintain choice and diversity in degrees while balancing the needs of students to transfer smoothly between and among the member institutions.

Because every degree has specific requirements, students who accumulate "system-wide" credits in this way would still need to pay attention to exactly *what* credit they have at which institution. A simple accumulation of credits would not guarantee that they could complete their degree upon transfer in the minimum time. Therefore, course-by-course allocation of credit would still be essential within this system. Currently, in B.C., the Open Learning Agency approaches most closely the idea of system wide transfer with the flexible credit transfer policies, and the "credit bank" it has developed.

Model 2: General Education Core Curriculum and the "First Year Transfer Program"

The vehicle for improving transfer most often cited in the U.S. transfer literature is the General Education Core Curriculum, or GECC. A GECC provides exposure to the humanities, social sciences and science perspectives considered fundamental to post-secondary education. A widespread approach has been for an "Intersegmental Coordinating Committee" or a Higher Education Commission to formulate collaboratively a set of criteria for courses which satisfy the general education requirements at the university, universities, or university system. In some instances the general criteria for GECC courses are established by legislation, but the choice of courses deemed to satisfy those criteria is entirely the responsibility of the sending institutions.

A common strategy is to list the knowledge and skills to be attained through the GECC, and then either list the courses, or the types of courses which could help students attain those outcomes. Frequently the "listing" and "delisting" of courses is a highly contentious process. Common to all these approaches is the idea that the GECC is pursued through an accumulation of courses and credits which form part of the eventual requirements for the degree. In general, GECC's range from 30 to 45 credits.

The idea of all or most degrees containing a general education component is not one which has been explicit in B.C., although many programs avoid excessive specialization at the lower divisions, and students are generally not required to declare a major until the end of their second year. In addition, most arts degrees have sufficient flexibility at the

5 Under university policy, university to university transfer is currently not covered by bilateral agreements in BC, or provided for in the transfer guide. Students who transfer between universities, therefore, can sometimes encounter more problems than do students who transfer from a college to a university.

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first and second year level to allow students to sample and experiment, and to gather electives to fulfill the breadth requirements of the degree.

The closest fit of a GECC to the B.C. context may be the idea of a common "First Year Transfer Program" of 30 credits. Such a program might incorporate the ideals of the GECC, and be flexible enough to accommodate the sampling function of first year courses, but also include the highest common denominators of first year requirements for all B.C. degree granting institutions (e.g. UBC's first year English requirement). Each institution could specify the degree programs for which students with the first year transfer program would be acceptable. Some degree programs are so specialized from the first year that a general First Year Transfer Program might not be an adequate preparation.

Since most students who choose 30 credits of university transferable courses at a B.C. college now would likely get full transfer credit anyway, the benefit of this concept would be in the security it would confer on transfer students in the face of the increasing complexity of the degree granting scene in B.C. Such a transfer program, then, would be useful only if it *guaranteed* a full 30 credit transfer to a reasonable number of degree programs at all B.C. universities and university colleges.

Although most students do not stay for two full years at a college, nevertheless a 30 credit transfer program may be seen as an undue enticement to students to leave after one year, thereby undermining the colleges' ability to offer two years of study. Incorporating a "First Year Transfer Program" into the two year associate degree might address this last issue.

Model 3: Standardized Pre-Major Curriculum

Because each college and university in B.C. independently designs its own programs, a degree in one discipline can look quite different in curriculum design, emphases and requirements from institution to institution. When the differentiation starts at the first and second year level, as it frequently has to in order to support upper division offerings, students intending to transfer may find themselves treading a path through a bewildering assortment of different requirements, or forced to choose their courses initially with only one particular receiving institution in mind.

In the U.S., North Carolina has moved towards addressing this problem by instituting a library of first and second year courses which must be used by all colleges in constructing curriculum. In Florida and Arizona, collaborative committees have been established to design standardized prerequisite or "pre-major" programs. Florida also required "that a single level, either upper or lower, was to be assigned to each course,"[6] thus addressing the problem of "upper division creep" identified in some of the transfer literature.

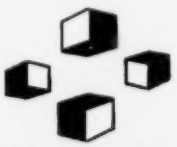
In B.C., some articulation committees have already moved towards a high level of agreement on common curricular elements in first and second year. Others have expressed a desire to explore the idea but need time and support to work out agreements. While articulation committees can accomplish much, their recommendations are not binding on individual departments. Specialized task forces, empowered to agree on changes, may be the appropriate bodies to discuss the aligning of curriculum.

A reconfiguring of the associate degree (minor changes only may be needed) to emphasize a combination of a first year transfer program and a standardized "concentration" in a discipline (the "pre-major" program) can be explored. Most students in B.C., however, transfer with fewer than 60 credits, so it is important not to link the idea of a "block" for academic students inextricably with the completion of a credential such as the AA degree. Both the 30 credit "First Year Transfer Program" described above, as well as standardized subject area concentrations or "pre-major" clusters, should be viewed as blocks. This "modular" approach to block transfer may be easier to implement and monitor than one which encompasses a complete two year program.

6 R.E. LeMon and Gita Wijesinghe Pitter, "Standardizing Across Institutions: Now That We All Look Alike, What Do We Look Like?" Paper presented to the Association of Institutional Researchers, May 1996. Office of Academic Program Review, State University System of Florida.

Model 4: Flexible Pre-Major Program

An interesting aspect of the collaborative "pre-major" planning exercise currently underway in Arizona is that there is no expectation that every program must be totally standardized, although each should contain some elements of common coursework. In many cases the standardization of curriculum is neither practical nor desirable, especially if it has the effect of stifling innovation or diversity. In such instances, an alternative to the Standardized Curriculum might be a "Flexible Pre-major Program" model. Collaborative committees might devise and agree on a set of flexible alternatives, any of which would constitute an acceptable set of lower division courses for entry into a degree program at the third year level. These alternatives could be based on a set of statements or principles collectively devised by the committee. Within a six course (18 semester credits) lower division Flexible Pre-major Program in English, for example, an articulation committee might establish two or three common required courses, including, say, a writing course, a literature survey course, a genre course, or a theory course, as well as either a list of acceptable alternatives for the remaining courses, or a statement such as "any university level English course." Alternately, it could establish only a list of acceptable courses, with no standard requirements, or simply a set of principles to govern the choice of courses. In any case, each participating institution would undertake to accept the flexible transfer program as fulfilling their pre-major requirements. Even if the student received a mixture of assigned and unassigned credit at the receiving institution, his/her transfer program would qualify him/her to move into the major at the third year level, with no necessity to pick up additional lower division courses.



Block transfer models have proven to be effective vehicles for introducing more coordination and more flexibility into the academic transfer environment.

Model 5: Learning Outcomes Model

In essence, this model compares the outcomes of the sending program with the entry requirements of the receiving program, but it does so not by an examination of the detailed content, or entry and performance requirements of the sending program, or by a holistic assessment of the overall content of the sending program, but through an agreed set of desired learning outcomes. These outcomes may be set by the sending or the receiving institution, or established through a collaborative process, and constitute the desired knowledge, skills, abilities, and sometimes attitudes of students entering the university program. Assessment can take place through a variety of instruments, which can include, for example, examinations, portfolio or interviews, since it is recognized that students may achieve these outcomes a number of different ways.

There are currently no examples of this approach to block transfer in B.C., although many colleges have shown interest in adopting the Learning Outcomes approach to curriculum and assessment, utilizing the expertise developed at the Centre for Curriculum, Transfer and Technology. The approach to the GECC taken in Illinois can perhaps be used to illustrate a partial learning outcomes model of transfer.

In Illinois, joint sending/receiving committees were established for each subject area. These committees established the learning outcomes for that area, and listed the objectives or competencies the students were expected to achieve. Following the establishment of those outcomes, a list of courses was agreed upon. This list did not contain specific course codes, rather it listed generic types of courses within each discipline which were deemed acceptable.

Learning Outcomes advocates may point out that going from a description of outcomes to a list of courses that will satisfy those outcomes merely interposes another step into the more traditional

course listing method used to construct a transfer arrangement. The Illinois approach illustrates a method of fitting the notion of outcomes into the traditional context of academic organization, utilizing mainstream procedures of course and credit assessment and without the need for wholesale reform of traditional curriculum and assessment. A block transfer based on a "pure" outcomes approach might be a huge undertaking, but would certainly provide "an opportunity to think deeply about the objectives of our curriculum"[7] rather than basing program design or course articulation on tradition or habit.

BLOCK TRANSFER MODELS

MODEL	*DESCRIPTORS*
1. System-wide Transfer	All university-level courses delivered by any public post-secondary institution would automatically transfer to all post-secondary institutions.
2. GECC (General Education Core Curriculum)	A required collection of courses designed to provide the exposure to humanities, social sciences and science perspectives considered essential to many degrees.
3. Standardized Pre-Major Program	Curriculum for the 1st and 2nd year prerequisites for the major is standardized for each discipline across all post-secondary institutions. (All institutions teach the same courses.)
4. Flexible Pre-Major Program	Curriculum for the 1st and 2nd year prerequisites for the major is chosen from a flexible set of courses, based on collaboratively established criteria. (All institutions may teach some of the same courses.)
5. Learning Outcomes	Transfer credit based on outcomes achieved, not on curriculum covered or courses taken. *or* Curriculum for "block" established collaboratively based on desired knowledge, skills and abilities (outcomes) the students must achieve.
6. Descriptive Pathways	Curriculum committees (or other groups) collaborate to agree on a "grid" which lists courses currently taught at sending institutions which students can take to transfer to all receiving institutions in the province.

7. Mark Battersby, "Outcomes Based Education: A College Faculty Perspective," *The Learning Quarterly* (B.C. Centre for Curriculum, Transfer and Technology, February 1997).

Model 6: Descriptive Pathways Model

The final model of block transfer is probably better described as a method of describing for students the best paths to full transfer. Full transfer into the program of their choice, as we know, is entirely accessible to many transfer students in B.C. as long as they have chosen their courses judiciously, and have had access to correct and up to date information or advising. Too often, students who have lost credits upon transfer, or who find that they have to pick up additional lower level credits before they can continue, also discover that such mistakes might have been preventable.

Block transfer, in the sense of "full transfer" with no loss of credit and no necessity to take additional courses, may be entirely attainable for students in many disciplines if sending and receiving institutions were to collaborate to produce a "Transfer Grid" listing all recommended or acceptable courses for each institution.[8] By following this grid a student at any college or university in the system should know exactly how to transfer two full years of credit to their intended degree program.

Such approaches can be *labeled* "block transfer" but need not involve signed, formal agreements, the application of system-wide principles to a negotiating process, or any other complicated and time consuming procedures. Each articulation committee could construct the grid for its own discipline. This would work best where all receiving institutions offered reasonably equivalent or comparable programs, and as long as there were no contentious issues of curriculum involved. The real power and value of such descriptive pathways, besides their use as advising tools, is in the security it confers on students and others, through the increased perception that *clear and reliable* paths to transfer exist, and in the system-wide application of the grid wherever possible.

Block Transfer for Academic Programs: Additional Considerations

Important questions remain regarding the feasibility of implementing block transfer for academic programs in B.C. The first question is, of course, is it worthwhile? Given the nature and complexities of the issues, might we be better advised to try to make overall improvements to our current model of course-by-course transfer so that "full transfer" is achievable for all students in the academic area?

Professional program BTA's by their nature are often constructed in such a way as to include few or no course-to-course equivalencies. While this is functional for programs for which little or no traditional transfer exists, if the same approach was applied to academic block transfer the results could be very disadvantageous to students, since specific equivalencies are important to fulfilling degree requirements. A simple application of block transfer principles as they currently apply to career and professional programs in B.C., to arts and science degrees would not therefore constitute an improvement to transfer for B.C. academic students.

The matter of "second order transfer credit" has been referred to in the introduction. Most institutions have policies in place which require students to present original transcripts for all courses. In the case of block transfer arrangements, some coursework may be of an untraditional or non-academic nature, which may not be acceptable to a further receiving institution, or to a degree or post-degree accrediting agency. As more institutions in B.C. become involved in negotiating BTA's, and if the principles of block transfer are extended to academic degrees, issues of second order transfer credit must be clearly understood and explicated. External accrediting agencies, such as the B.C. College of Teachers, must also be included in these discussions.

8 Such a grid, labeled the "Tri-University Block Transfer Agreement for Biological Sciences" is illustrated on p.23 of the 1996-97 *Alberta Transfer Guide*.

Comment and response to this discussion paper is invited, and encouraged.
See page 12 for details.

Conclusion

Any successful revision, if needed, to our current transfer policies in British Columbia will require the full agreement and collaboration of all partners in the system. If reform is considered beneficial or necessary, but agreement cannot be reached, is it an acceptable option to turn to a legislative process to accomplish it? Can institutional autonomy be maintained in an environment where compliance is legislated, rather than where change is voluntary? Can transfer be smoothed while still maintaining choice and diversity in degrees?

The questions given below encompass the main issues raised by the Strategic Plan, and examined in this discussion paper. The B.C. Council on Admissions and Transfer invites your response, individual or institutional, to these questions, or to any others posed by this examination of our transfer system. Responses to this paper will form part of the basis for further discourse on the future of credit transfer in B.C. It is vital that the Council is able to solicit and depict accurately the opinions of all sectors and members of the system in any deliberation about best practice and policy in transfer.

Block Transfer: Issues and Options
A Discussion Paper, prepared by Finola Finlay
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Should we develop a block transfer system for arts and sciences degrees in British Columbia?

If YES:

- ❑ Should block transfer supplement or replace our current course to course transfer system?
- ❑ Which model or models of block transfer (ranked in order of preference) are most feasible for our British Columbia context?
- ❑ Should block transfer be implemented through legislation, or only through voluntary agreement by participating institutions?

If NO:

- ❑ What improvements, if any, would you suggest to our current system of credit transfer?

Responses may be submitted by mail, fax or e-mail to:

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Vancouver, BC V6B 3H6

Fax: (604) 683-0576
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DEADLINE FOR RESPONSES:
September 30, 1997

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SERVING BC's EDUCATION SYSTEM
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